

**SAVIORS OF THE SOUTH:**

A Study of Militia, Terrain, and Regular Forces during the Southern Theatre of the  
American Revolution, 1780-1781.

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## Preface

After a series of humiliating defeats for the American Continental forces in 1780, the young American Congress was once again resigned to the task of considering another replacement for their general for the Southern Detachment.<sup>1</sup> By this point, the war had been a series of successes followed by defeats for the Americans. The quick, initial gains made by the Revolutionaries at Boston, as well as the fervor that came with it, were quickly soured with news of the loss of New York City to the Redcoats in 1776. Later, the decisive victory at Saratoga in 1777 gave way to the introduction of France and, later, Spain into the war on the side of the Continental revolutionaries.<sup>2</sup> By May of 1780, British General Henry Clinton had subdued Savannah, Georgia as well as Charleston, South Carolina – the South’s largest city. The fall of Charleston prompted Lord Charles Cornwallis, commander of the British Forces in the American South, to move on into the hinterland of the South greatly unopposed.<sup>3</sup> The humiliating defeat at the Battle of Camden sent American General Horatio Gates into a panicked frenzy, leaving the American Southern Department without a viable military commander.<sup>4</sup> Traditional military tactics and approaches to combating the British regulars deployed in the colonies had typically been met with little success for the American forces, especially when considering the Patriot

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<sup>1</sup> William Simms, *The life of Nathanael Greene, major-general in the army of the revolution* (New York: Derby & Jackson. 1859), 102.

<sup>2</sup> John E. Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press. 2007), 246-259.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh F. Ranklin, *Greene and Cornwallis: The Campaign in the Carolinas*. (Raleigh: Department of Cultural Resources, Division of Archives and History. 1976), 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Babbitts, *A Devil of a Whipping* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1998), 2-5.

militia, which made up a large part of the Southern Department's military manpower.<sup>5</sup> These continual losses in the South and yielded a dramatic loss in morale for the American revolutionary effort.<sup>6</sup> After the loss at the Battle of Camden, Cornwallis had a virtually uncontested hold on the South and forced the Continental Congress to find a much-needed replacement for General Horatio Gates. On December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1780, the command of the South would be appointed to career soldier Nathanael Greene, a move that would have a dramatic and rippling effect on the outcome of the American Revolution.<sup>7</sup>

In a comprehensive study of the Southern Theatre of the American Revolution, it is necessary to approach the subject of victory from all angles - most importantly, the question of "how" the South was won. The American Revolution was not won by sheer luck nor by one single, defining act. The war was a long and arduous struggle that involved contrast in social classes and race. Those from the poorest of backgrounds won the war just as much as it was from wealthy plantation owners. This is perhaps best emphasized in the American Southern Campaign of 1780-1781. Men such as Nathanael Greene, Daniel Morgan, and William Campbell, had all led private and humble lives before the war. Nathanael Greene was born into a Quaker family as the son of a blacksmith. His lust for learning and self-education would expand from just math, science, and history to include military strategy as well as he became part of the organization of a Pennsylvania militia in 1774.<sup>8</sup> Without the support of his parents, who considered him an outcast due to his education and fascination of military strategy, or personal wealth, Nathanael Greene

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Pugh, "The Revolutionary Militia in the Southern Campaign, 1780-1781," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1957): 158-161.

<sup>6</sup> Nathanael Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, ed. Richard Snowman, Dennis Conrad, Roger Parks, and Elizabeth Stevens. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1994), 88.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89.

<sup>8</sup> William Simms, *The life of Nathanael Greene, major-general in the army of the revolution*, 27-28; 30-35.

entered the militia at the lowest rank possible, a militia private, and would eventually rise to be considered one of George Washington's most trustworthy commanders.<sup>9</sup> His understanding of military tactics from his time in the militia, as well as his knowledge of military logistics from his time as Quartermaster General, would well-equip Greene to deal with the larger and more powerful British force under the Command of Lord Cornwallis. Much like Greene, Morgan also came from humble beginnings. After getting into a conflict with his father, Morgan was forced to leave his home at age 17 and worked various odd jobs until saving up enough money to sustain himself. After serving in the militia during the French and Indian War, Morgan was sentenced to receiving 500 lashes for assaulting his superior officer during an altercation. Allegedly only receiving "499" of those lashes, Morgan retained his disdain for the British Army well into the inception of the American Revolution, where he quickly devoted his time, effort, and finances to the Patriot cause.<sup>10</sup> Lastly, William Campbell was perhaps one of the first Colonials to proclaim hostility against the British Empire.<sup>11</sup> Growing up as a farmer after the death of his father, Campbell stands as a prime example of the British imposition of taxes and their effects on the interior of the Colonies. These ragged frontiersmen did not take kindly to the British attempt to "trample their rights" as Englishmen and sought to protect their very way of life by any means possible.

Regardless of their backgrounds, these commanders were not solely responsible for victory in the Southern Campaign. Instead, the calculated use of militia forces, advantageous terrain exploitation, and successful use of Continental Regulars served to thrust the American

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<sup>9</sup> William Simms, *The life of Nathanael Greene, major-general in the army of the revolution*, 9-22.

<sup>10</sup> William Waller Edwards, "Morgan and His Riflemen," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (1914): 75-77.

<sup>11</sup> Lyman Draper, *Kings Mountain and its Heroes: History of the Battle of Kings Mountain, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1780, and the events which led to it* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co, 1971), 381.

South into the hands of the Revolutionaries. Robert Pugh, historian and author of “The Revolutionary Militia in the Southern Campaign, 1780-1781”, states that the use of militia forces were not always seen in such a positive light. During the Campaigns of the North in 1776 and 1777, militia forces were generally seen as a hindrance to the American Continental Army. In fact, Pugh even quotes George Washington himself as stating that “...no dependence could be in Militia or other Troop than those enlisted and embodied for a period longer than...regulations heretofore have prescribed.”<sup>12</sup> According to Robert Wright, author of *The Continental Army*, the differences between the British use of Colonial Militia in the years prior to the Revolution left many thoroughly unprepared for open-field European-styled warfare. In fact, most provincials had been “regulated to support and reserve functions.”<sup>13</sup> Because of this, it is clear why Washington would desire Continental Regulars over the use of militia. The usage of these trained and organized soldiers would form the backbone of the Continental Army and would enforce the idea of armed revolution to the British Crown. However, the use of “American” regulars would vary greatly from that of traditional European regulars. For instance, as Wright claims, American regulars and militia forces were to be some of the first to make the use of the flintlock rifle musket mandatory. American forces also often substituted their arms for more accurate rifles such as the Pennsylvania and Kentucky long rifles – rifles that often proved to be deadly accurate “...at up to 400 yards...”<sup>14</sup> These deviations in equipment allowed for American regulars to become experts at skirmish and ambush-style tactics, but perform poor initially at open-field combat with the British. To overcome these shortcomings, Commanders such as William

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Pugh, “The Revolutionary Militia in the Southern Campaign, 1780-1781,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1957): 157. <http://www.jstor.org.proxyse.uits.iu.edu/stable/1922108>

<sup>13</sup> Robert K. Wright, *The Continental Army* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, US Army. 1983), 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

Campbell, Daniel Morgan, and Nathanael Greene each employed strategies that would incorporate the use of terrain to both emphasize the advantages of the American style of combat and nullify the advantages of the British.

To further elaborate on the specific uses of militia, terrain, and regular forces by the American Revolutionaries, an analysis will be made from three individual battles of the Southern Campaign: the battles of Kings Mountain, Cowpens, and Guilford Courthouse. Each of these battles embodied the three themes of militia use, terrain use, and use of regular forces and thus became perfect specimens for an analysis of why these encounters were so vital to the American victory over the British-occupied South. The all-militia forces of Captain William Campbell at Kings Mountain, the combined defense from General Daniel Morgan at Cowpens, and the strategic victory over the British by General Nathanael Greene at Guilford Courthouse all set in motion the end of the American Revolution.<sup>15</sup> The effectiveness of the innovative tactics and strategies used by American forces in the Southern Theatre cannot be underestimated, just as their value cannot be stressed enough. These three battles highlight the innovation and tactical brilliance employed by the American militia, Nathanael Greene and his subordinate Daniel Morgan, which led to a swift and effective end to the British “Southern Pacification” campaign.<sup>16</sup> The use of surprise, advantageous terrain usage, and riflemen tactics ensured a quick and decisive victory for the American militia forces at Kings Mountain. For General Daniel Morgan, the effectiveness of his usage of terrain and his militia forces allowed for a pivotal victory at Cowpens.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Nathanael Greene’s masterful understanding of skirmish-styled conflict

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<sup>15</sup> Larry H. Addington. *The Patterns of War Since the Eighteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Babbitts, *A Devil of a Whipping*, 145-147; 158-160.

<sup>17</sup> Hugh F. Rankin. *Greene and Cornwallis: The Campaign in the Carolinas* (Raleigh: Department of Cultural Resources, Division of Archives and History. 1976), 38-39.

with the British regulars allowed for maximum casualties for his enemy while he retained the bulk of his forces. Knowing that he could replenish his forces far easier than British General Cornwallis could, Greene's tactic paved the way for the British retreat back into Virginia where they would remain indefinitely.<sup>18</sup>

### **Historiography**

The historiography of the Southern Theatre of the American Revolution is wrought with division. This internal division amongst historians lies mainly amongst, those who can be considered, Consensus and Progressive/New Left historians. Historian T. H. Breen, author of *American Insurgents, American Patriots*, claims that the struggle for Independence in the South is based on a system of class conflict. In his book, Breen states that those who took up the cause for independence were generally a "middling sort", a term used to describe ordinary folks or those in the lower to middle classes of society. As Breen suggests, those Revolutionaries who took up arms in the South were generally illiterate and of the lower class.<sup>19</sup> However, according to Hugh Rankin, author of *Greene and Cornwallis: The Campaign in the Carolinas*, the provincial elite of the South, large tobacco and cotton plantation owners did well to stay either neutral or remained loyal to the King due to lucrative trade rights.<sup>20</sup> Both Breen and Rankin suggest that this choice of sides would be due to an inevitable class struggle against elites in Britain. Both of these historians have adopted a more Progressive or New Left view on the

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<sup>18</sup> Robert K. Wright, *The Continental Army* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, US Army. 1983), 164-167.

<sup>19</sup> T. H. Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots* (New York: Hill and Wang. 2010), 25-29.

<sup>20</sup> Hugh F. Rankin, *Greene and Cornwallis: The Campaign in the Carolinas* (Raleigh: Department of Cultural Resources, Division of Archives and History. 1976), 1.

Conflict in the South, especially considering their publications are much more modern in comparison to others.

However, there are those such as historians John Ferling and Robert Wright who attest that the Southern Campaign was not influenced by social or class conflict, but rather by a clash in political ideology between the colonists and their British overlords. This is a very Consensus-based history in which the socio-economic aspects of Southern society are largely lost in favor of covering the deeds, and misdeeds, of the American patriots and those still loyal to the British crown. For instance, Wright cites the main causes of conflict between the revolutionaries and the Loyalists were due to "...the British government's corruption and unconstitutional policies."<sup>21</sup> Though this is certainly correct, this sort of view towards the history of conflict in the American South largely ignores any pre-existing tension between the majority of illiterate farmers and the minority of the plantation elite.

However, the rest of the historiography over this topic seems to be based on the exact events of the battles themselves or analyses of the overall conflict in the South. Historians such as Lawrence Babbitts, Lyman Draper, and Robert Pugh cover the successes of the militia primarily, with some explanation of the individual commanders such as Captain Campbell and General Morgan. Other historians, such as William Simms and John Ferling have often made comparative analyses between General Horatio Gates and General Nathanael Greene.<sup>22</sup> According to Lawrence Babbitts, the tactical successes of Greene have indeed outshone the fact that most of his battles were in-fact defeats and were perhaps overlooked due to the humiliation caused by Gate's defeat at Camden.<sup>23</sup> As historian William Simms states in his book, *The life of*

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<sup>21</sup> Robert K. Wright, *The Continental Army*, 10

<sup>22</sup> John E. Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence*, 463-465.

<sup>23</sup> Lawrence Babbitts, *A Devil of a Whipping*, 5-6.

*Nathanael Greene, major-general in the army of the revolution*, that this loss produced a “...conviction of the necessity of making new and superior exertions to arrest the progress which the enemy was making in the South.”<sup>24</sup> Author and Historian Lawrence Babbitts attests that this would be fulfilled with the Greene’s succession of the role of Commander of the Southern Department. Faced with a daunting task ahead of him, Babbitts claims that Greene’s chief accomplishment “was keeping his army in the field.”<sup>25</sup> Babbitts continues, “As long as it existed, the army posed a threat to the British and became a rallying point” for supporters of the American revolution.<sup>26</sup> It is just as important to understand the historiography of the Southern Campaign as it is to understand the campaign itself. Some authors of primary sources, such as the British Lieutenant-Colonel Banastre Tarleton, does well to show his bias against the American victories in the South by greatly downplaying any losses made on his part. By understanding the historiography of the Southern Campaign, one can begin to see just how vital these victories were for the American revolutionaries. The loss at Camden in 1780 greatly demoralized the American South and further pushed the southern elite towards the Crown. However, as General Cornwallis moved closer towards Charlotte, the American Southern militia would stage a dramatic comeback by removing the threat of Cornwallis’ Loyalist militia atop a place called Kings Mountain.

### **The Battle of Kings Mountain**

The Battle of Kings Mountain is a notable example of just how important the usage of militia forces were to the forces of the Southern Campaign. Historian Lyman Dykeman states

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<sup>24</sup> William Simms, *The life of Nathanael Greene, major-general in the army of the revolution* (New York: Derby & Jackson. 1859), 102.

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence Babbitts, *A Devil of a Whipping*, 6-7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

that "...at the Battle of Kings Mountain every participant but one was an American..." which corroborates with accounts that the British force here, led by British Patrick Ferguson, was simply rallying Tory militia to guard Cornwallis' flank on his march to Charlotte.<sup>27</sup> With the loss of his flank, Cornwallis was forced to abandon his plans to invade North Carolina. Dykeman claims that prior to the battle that the reliance on "loyalists was even more crucial to this campaign" than before.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, the American Revolutionaries also became heavily reliant on patriot forces in the South, thus making a victory necessary to maintain a foothold there.<sup>29</sup> Dykeman points out that rumor also plays a key role in the aftermath of the battle. Not only does the death of Ferguson and complete destruction of his militia forces send shockwaves through British command, but it also seemed propagate fear through the spread of viscous rumor of the actual numbers of the patriot militia. According to historian and author of *With Fire and Sword, The Battle of Kings Mountain* Wilma Dykeman, rumor had reached by a British messenger Cornwallis that the rebel militia force had been "...enlarged the patriot army to 3,000 [from 900 men who actually fought] and placed it on the march towards British Headquarters [in Charlotte]..."<sup>30</sup> Oddly enough, as the British forces moved to flee from the Patriot militia, the Patriots were also moving in effort to avoid conflict with the British. Hearing of the proximity the 900 militiamen held to the forces of "Bloody" Tarleton, they quickly left Kings Mountain and moved to rebase in friendly territory.<sup>31</sup> Since the patriot militia was actually in retreat and did not number the "3,000" men as reported, Cornwallis "turned his army back towards South

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<sup>27</sup> Wilma Dykeman, *With Fire and Sword: The Battle of Kings Mountain* (Washington DC: Office of Publications, National Parks Service, US Department of the Interior. 1978), 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Pugh, "The Revolutionary Militia in the Southern Campaign, 1780-1781," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1957): 154-155.

<sup>30</sup> Wilma Dykeman, *With Fire and Sword: The Battle of Kings Mountain*, 77.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 77-78.

Carolina” and was forced to abandon his goal of taking Charlotte as well as “20 wagons loaded with supplies.”<sup>32</sup> The confusion in the actual number of patriot militia who fought in the Battle of Kings Mountain could be due to the fact that most of these men were Provincials, otherwise known as “Rangers” by Tarleton.<sup>33</sup> In his book, “Kings Mountain and its Heroes”, Lyman Draper attests that this kind militiamen were not part of a permanent corps, but were instead raised in haste out of necessity and could just as quickly disband once no longer needed.<sup>34</sup> Though Dkyeman claims the exact number runs close to 1,100 loyalist militiamen, Draper claims “the exact strength of Ferguson’s force cannot with certainty be determined.”<sup>35</sup> With the uncertainty of the number of the force that opposed them, it is clear that the ambush-style attack pattern of the Patriot militia allowed them to gain the maximum edge over their numerically superior foes.

As the Tory militia lay unsuspecting, Colonel William Campbell of the Patriot militia launched the assault by shedding his coat and exclaiming loudly, “Here they are, my brave boys; shout like hell, and fight like devils!”<sup>36</sup> With this, the forest around the British encampment erupted in the shots of rifles and the screams of men. After listening to the “almost deafening yells”, Captain DePeyster of the Loyalist militia said to Ferguson, “These things are ominous – these are the damned yelling boys!”<sup>37</sup> Not only was the surprise attack demoralizing for the Tory militia, but the yelling, screaming, and making an “Indian war-whoop” provided a psychological

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<sup>32</sup> Wilma Dykeman, *With Fire and Sword: The Battle of Kings Mountain*, 77.

<sup>33</sup> Lyman Draper, *Kings Mountain and its Heroes: History of the Battle of Kings Mountain, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1780, and the events which led to it* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co, 1971), 273.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

terror to the already confused Tory militiamen<sup>38</sup>. As the Loyalist militia finally formed their ranks, they were ordered to try to repel the raiding Patriot forces by returning fire and fixing bayonets to repel the advance. As Draper describes the battle, “The mountain was covered in flame and smoke, and seemed to thunder.”<sup>39</sup> “The shouts of the mountaineers, the peals of the hundreds of rifles and muskets, the loud commands...of the respective officers...” all resounded around Kings Mountain, adding to the chaos and calamity of the situation, further depleting the Tory morale.<sup>40</sup> The final blow to Tory morale came when Major Patrick Ferguson was slain after “...nearly an hour’s fighting.”<sup>41</sup> Draper, who quotes Tarleton’s recount of the survivors, states that “...his whole corps was thrown into total confusion...the remainder, after a short resistance, were overpowered and compelled to surrender.”<sup>42</sup> The subsequent surrender of the British forces on Kings Mountain was met with little enthusiasm. According to Draper, some of the Patriot militiamen either did not understand the numerous white flags that dotted the British line, or chose to not acknowledge them and continued the slaughter. Colonel Campbell was active in putting a halt to these actions, often charging up to groups of surrendering Loyalists and demanding that they drop their arms, lest they continue to be fired upon.<sup>43</sup>

Much like Dykeman claims, Banastre Tarleton, after receiving orders to dispatch a reinforcing army to aid Ferguson, claims that his forces were to be recalled from the mountain after finding the grisly site of the destruction of Ferguson’s militia force.<sup>44</sup> As she states in her

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<sup>38</sup> Lyman Draper, *Kings Mountain and its Heroes: History of the Battle of Kings Mountain, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1780, and the events which led to it*, 248-249.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 282-283.

<sup>44</sup> Lieutenant-General Banastre Tarleton, *A history of the campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the southern provinces of North America*, 165.

book, the destruction of Ferguson's militia "added to the fear and depression it communicated to the loyalists along the [North Carolina] borders," and that news of such event was "sensibly felt by Earl Cornwallis."<sup>45</sup> Tarleton admits the "...weakness of his army,...the want of knowledge of his enemy's designs, and the total ruin of his militia presented a gloomy prospect..." for Cornwallis, which thus forced him to abandon his ambitions to strike into the north.<sup>46</sup> Draper insists that it was not only the psychological terror inflicted by the Patriot militia that doomed the Tory ranks, but the overall choice of encampment by Major Ferguson himself. In fact, Draper cites several historians in confirming that the overall choice for positioning his forces on the top of Kings Mountain was "...not well chosen..." and that it "...gave the Americans an opportunity of covering themselves in their approaches."<sup>47</sup>

The Battle of Kings Mountain not only emphasized the importance of militia forces for the American Revolutionaries, but for the British as well. According to Robert Pugh, Captain Ferguson had positioned his forces atop Kings Mountain as he began a large recruitment drive for North Carolina loyalists. As Pugh states, "It was hoped that in this manner considerable Tory support – including large numbers of recruits – for the invasion could be recruited."<sup>48</sup> It was Ferguson's hope, as well as that of Cornwallis, that sufficient numbers of Tory militiamen could be recruited to further cement their command of the American South with the capture of

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<sup>45</sup> Lieutenant-General Banastre Tarleton, *A history of the campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the southern provinces of North America*, 165.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-167.

<sup>47</sup> Lyman Draper, *Kings Mountain and its Heroes: History of the Battle of Kings Mountain, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1780, and the events which led to it*, 288.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Pugh, "The Revolutionary Militia in the Southern Campaign, 1780-1781," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1957): 165.

Charlotte. The value of the militia, thus, expands from that of an effective fighting force to that of a means of supplies and manpower reserves as well.<sup>49</sup>

The loss of his militia forces covering his flank forced Lord Cornwallis into a rather dense situation and would eventually force him back into South Carolina. The Patriot victory at Kings Mountain also served to improve morale for supporters of the revolution in the South.<sup>50</sup> With the American Southern Campaign still operational, the American Continental Congress would be forced to take action to replace General Horatio Gates as the Commander of the Southern Theatre. In their decision, they would choose a Quaker-born Pennsylvania native who had spent much of his adult life rising through the ranks of the newly established American Army: Nathanael Greene.<sup>51</sup>

### **The Battle of Cowpens**

The Battle of Cowpens is yet another example of how a smaller, less experienced force can use tactic and guile to overcome a vastly superior foe. As General Cornwallis closed in on the newly formed Army of the South, General Nathanael Greene chose to commit to the unthinkable: he split his force in half. The unexpected move not only perplexed Cornwallis, but also forced his attention towards two new targets instead of one. Not wanting to be overwhelmed or flanked by the newly created army, headed by General Daniel Morgan (still under Greene's command), Cornwallis chose to mimic the Americans and proceeded to split their force as well.

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Pugh, "The Revolutionary Militia in the Southern Campaign, 1780-1781," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1957): 164-165.

<sup>50</sup> Lyman Draper, *Kings Mountain and its Heroes: History of the Battle of Kings Mountain, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1780, and the events which led to it*, 376-377.

<sup>51</sup> William Simms, *The life of Nathanael Greene, major-general in the army of the revolution*, 101.

Though this tactic may seem insignificant at first, it is important to know that the British forces relied heavily on Loyalist militia as well as troop ships from England for their reinforcement. By dragging Cornwallis deeper into the American hinterland, Greene was negating any chance Cornwallis had at a successful reinforcement. By splitting his army further, Cornwallis was now in danger of being whittled away by harassing militia attacks.<sup>52</sup> According to historian Lawrence Babbitts, author of *A Devil of a Whipping*, Greene did this not only to gain the advantage of mobility and speed, but to aid with a plague of logistical supplies problems.<sup>53</sup> From his experience as Quartermaster General, Greene knew how vital it was to have a firm and fixed supply line. Forcing Cornwallis to pursue him deeper into the Carolinas forced the British to live off the land and the people there. In dividing his forces, General Cornwallis set out his most ambitious commander to remove the threat of Greene's new army under the command of Daniel Morgan. For this task, he assigned Lieutenant-General Banastre Tarleton to lead a group of Dragoons and Cornwallis' elite Light troop to subdue Morgan.<sup>54</sup> Knowing what was approaching, Morgan decided to place his troops outside of Cowpens, South Carolina. According to Babbitts, the victory at Kings Mountain was so beneficial that "...the political situation [of the entire Revolution] demanded that Greene exploit momentum acquired by the Kings Mountain victory..." to help "keep South Carolina in the revolutionary fold."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Larry H. Addington. *The Patterns of War Since the Eighteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 18.

<sup>53</sup> Lawrence Babbitts, *A Devil of a Whipping*, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Nathanael Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, ed. Richard Snowman, Dennis Conrad, Roger Parks, and Elizabeth Stevens, 106-107; 125.

<sup>55</sup> Lawrence Babbitts, *A Devil of a Whipping*, 7.

With Morgan alone and endangering the British stronghold at Ninety Six, Tarleton was ordered to “...push [Morgan] to the utmost...” while defending the town from rebel attack.<sup>56</sup> As Babbitts claims in his book, “...to accomplish the latter, he [Tarleton] requested a reinforcement of light troop...”, troops who were key in Cornwallis’ plan to invade North Carolina through Charlotte.<sup>57</sup> Once Cornwallis noted that Morgan posed no such threat to Ninety Six, he authorized Tarleton to “...drive [Morgan] out of South Carolina.”<sup>58</sup> Though Tarleton was faced with severe weather and logistical dilemmas, Morgan had accomplished just what he set out to do – pose a threat to Cornwallis’ rear flank while raising Southern spirits to the Patriot cause. When Tarleton finally caught up with Morgan’s forces, his army was without sleep for 48 hours, without food, and running low on ammunition. Morgan’s forces, however, had been resting, waiting, and digging in to positions selected by Morgan himself for strategic benefit.<sup>59</sup> The lack of flank severely nullified the beneficial use of Tarleton’s Dragoons, the wooded right flank was defensible and saturated with marksmen known as “Morgan’s Riflemen”, and the American position on the high ground meant that the British would be disadvantaged in rushing the center. However, by placing his militia forces in the center (known for their lack of staying power in a battle, these forces were easily routed by British regulars), Morgan presented a tempting ruse to Tarleton. Knowing his hatred of colonial militia, Morgan set militia forces in the center as “bait” that Tarleton would assume would “...fold under the first bayonet charge.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Lieutenant-General Banastre Tarleton, *A history of the campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the southern provinces of North America*, 219.

<sup>57</sup> Lawrence Babbitts, *A Devil of a Whipping*, 47.

<sup>58</sup> Lieutenant-General Banastre Tarleton, *A history of the campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the southern provinces of North America*, 260.

<sup>59</sup> Lawrence Babbitts, *A Devil of a Whipping*, 156.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-73; 75-77.

By forcing Tarleton to make the opening move, Morgan reserved the defensive position for the American forces, thus would "...minimize chances of disorder inherent in moving men across the landscape."<sup>61</sup> As Babbitts claims, Morgan's maneuvering before, during, and after the battle are nothing short of genius. In anticipation to the thrust of the British lines, Morgan created "progressively stronger defensive lines" which would act in tiers, forcing the British to exhaust themselves as they pushed on.<sup>62</sup> "As the British drove successive American lines from the battlefield, they anticipated victory, only to encounter another, stronger line after exerting themselves."<sup>63</sup> The strain on the British soldier at this point was too much and once militia forces returned to the battlefield to fire yet another volley, the British lines broke. To defend against regrouping attacks, Morgan positioned his men in a lower position, exploiting the "known tendency of British infantry to fire high."<sup>64</sup> This tactic not only nullified some of his losses, but it also helped maximize those of the British.

Another facet of Morgan's victory that is praised heavily by Babbitts is his expert usage of militia forces. Instead of expecting the militia to break after the first infantry charge, Morgan ordered them to fire "three shots" before retreating. Instead of needlessly wasting this resource, the militia was able to regroup afterwards and continue to fight through the battle as supporting units and skirmishers, helping to cripple Tarleton's advance.<sup>65</sup> As reported by Robert C. Pugh, author of the article "The Revolutionary Militia in the Southern Campaign, 1780-1781", also commended Morgan on his usage of the colonial militia forces to exploit a victory

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<sup>61</sup> Lawrence Babbitts, *A Devil of a Whipping*, 10; 22.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 152.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 93.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-95.

over Tarleton. Unlike General Horatio Gates' use of militiamen as regulars, Morgan opted for a starkly different approach. Instead, "...the American militia were made to serve as a complement to the Continentals."<sup>66</sup> Instead of being expected to fulfill the role of an American regular, Morgan insisted on using them for supporting roles. For instance, Morgan anticipated Tarleton's advance on the center, where the bulk of his militia forces were openly stationed, and instead placed in "...positioned from which their aimed fire would be most effective against an advancing enemy."<sup>67</sup> This use on riflemen would allow consistent and harassing fire on clear targets as the British regulars marched across the open fields at Cowpens.<sup>68</sup>

The loss of Cornwallis' light infantry was so damaging to him that it was reported that, upon hearing news of the loss at Cowpens, "...he pressed so hard that the sword [he was leaning against] snapped in two, and he swore loudly that he would recapture Morgan's prisoners no matter what the cost."<sup>69</sup> Of course, the capture of "over 700 British soldiers" was an incredible feat; the victory also served to raise local morale of the Patriot cause and would force Cornwallis to abandon "and destroy his luggage" in order to keep up with the movements of Morgan and Greene's "Flying Army".<sup>70</sup> Greene then set about his strategic retreat, his "Race to the Dan", in which he would move his forces and Morgan's forces parallel towards the Dan River towards Guilford Courthouse.<sup>71</sup> Once again, Greene's usage of small "hit-and-run" tactics would force Cornwallis into an unfavorable position of pinning the majority of his army at

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<sup>66</sup> Robert Pugh, "The Revolutionary Militia in the Southern Campaign, 1780-1781," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1957): 169.

<sup>67</sup> Robert Pugh, "The Revolutionary Militia in the Southern Campaign, 1780-1781," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1957): 169-170.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>70</sup> Nathanael Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, ed. Richard Snowman, Dennis Conrad, Roger Parks, and Elizabeth Stevens, 153-155.

<sup>71</sup> Lawrence Babbitts, *A Devil of a Whipping*, 145.

Guilford Courthouse. Without his light infantry, his extra provisions and baggage train, and with a series of stinging losses nagging at his prestige, Cornwallis would again be forced into fighting on American terms. As Babbitts claims, the Battle of Cowpens was “...an action that crippled the British army but left the American army intact.”<sup>72</sup>

### **The Battle of Guilford Courthouse**

The Battle of Guilford Courthouse is a virtual embodiment of what the American Revolutionaries had learned thus far from fighting the British in the Southern Campaign. Much like the Battle of Cowpens, Greene positioned his forces in a means to negate the British advantages held over them. Learning from Morgan, Greene also positioned his main body of infantry in similar progressive defense tiers, thus forcing the enemy to exert themselves further. Upon positioning, Greene’s forces were, once again, set in an easily defensible position at Guilford, allowing the terrain to be a hindrance to any possible British victory. Greene personally described the terrain as “...a wilderness, with a few cleared fields interspersed here and there.”<sup>73</sup> By his order, Greene had placed his army “...drawn up on a large hill of ground surrounded by other hills...” with his first two lines nestled in the beginning of a tree-line “...with an open field directly in the front” of them.<sup>74</sup> His riflemen and militia forces would be placed near the front of this wooded area, granting them a largely unmolested view of the defenseless advancing British. With this setup, the British could not rely on either an infantry charge or cavalry attack due to the

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<sup>72</sup> Lawrence Babbitts, *A Devil of a Whipping*, 146.

<sup>73</sup> Nathanael Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, ed. Richard Snowman, Dennis Conrad, Roger Parks, and Elizabeth Stevens, 434.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

density of the wood, a key advantage which also made British salvos less effective<sup>75</sup>. Relying on the same tactic used by Morgan in Cowpens, Greene had set his Continental regulars in three tiers that were progressively larger in size.<sup>76</sup> As Tarleton recollects, "...the thickness of the woods where the conflict happened prevented the cavalry [from] making a charge...and impeded the British infantry moving forward in a well-connected line."<sup>77</sup> By understanding his enemy's strengths, Greene chose a field and location that would negate most advantages held by the British, forcing them to take the field only at an unbearable cost. Tarleton would even describe Greene's position as being "well chosen, and the manner of forming his troops [was] unexceptionable."<sup>78</sup>

On March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1781, Cornwallis detached his baggage and supply train and made his way towards Greene's position at Guildford. According to Rankin, the first encounter was made as Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Lee, father of future Confederate General Robert E. Lee, clashed with Lt. Colonel Banastre Tarleton in a preset ambush. As the British advanced with the force of around 2,200, Greene waited patiently in prepared defensive positions with his 4,400 men – only 1,490 of whom were Continental regulars.<sup>79</sup> As the attack went underway, the defensive strength of Greene's position inflicted high numbers of casualties on the advancing British infantry. As the continued, harassing fire poured onto the British infantry, the American forces began to advance, first from the First Maryland regulars and then immediately from Colonel Washington, commander of the American Dragoons. The combination of harassing rifleman salvos that

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<sup>75</sup> John Hiatt, *Guildford Courthouse National Military Park: Cultural Landscape Report* (Greensboro: National Parks Service, 2003), 15.

<sup>76</sup> Hugh F. Rankin, *Greene and Cornwallis: The Campaign in the Carolinas*, 70.

<sup>77</sup> Lieutenant-General Banastre Tarleton, *A history of the campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the southern provinces of North America*, 305.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>79</sup> Hugh F. Rankin, *Greene and Cornwallis: The Campaign in the Carolinas*, 70.

targeted British officers, impenetrable terrain on the American flanks, and progressively thicker American lines prompted the British forces to almost break into a full rout.<sup>80</sup> Seeing this, Cornwallis immediately ordered his artillery to fire “grape-shot”, an anti-infantry canister made up of smaller lead balls, nails, and shrapnel, at the advancing American Dragoons. Though under protest by General O’Hara, commander of the British artillery, the order was followed through and the oncoming salvo of grapeshot stopped the American advance, but at the cost of the lives of many British Guards that lay between the Dragoons and the artillery. From here, Cornwallis introduced fresh infantry onto the field, placing Greene in a tough position.<sup>81</sup> Due to the initial success of his easily defensible position, his forces had drove the British back across the same open fields that they oversaw earlier in the battle. Overall, Greene’s line was overstretched and many of his forces were out of range for immediate reinforcement. Seeing the number of casualties he had caused Cornwallis, Greene chose to retire as the British regrouped for another advance. Choosing to retire at this time saved Greene the bulk of his troops while still retaining a high morale overall.<sup>82</sup>

Even though the battle was technically a defeat for Greene’s forces, the impact made on Cornwallis’ army was irreversible. On the British part, the casualties mounted up to a fourth of their entire army (missing, wounded, and dead).<sup>83</sup> Greene himself counts American losses at the battle as “trivial” in comparison to British losses and immediately wrote to the President of the Continental Congress, Samuel Huntington to elaborate on the battle.<sup>84</sup> Though Tarleton himself

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<sup>80</sup> Hugh F. Rankin, *Greene and Cornwallis: The Campaign in the Carolinas*, 73-75.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 75.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 75-77.

<sup>83</sup> Lieutenant-General Banastre Tarleton, *A history of the campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the southern provinces of North America*, 276.

<sup>84</sup> Nathanael Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, ed. Richard Snowman, Dennis Conrad, Roger Parks, and Elizabeth Stevens, 432-434.

claims the American losses as “significant” due to the loss of over 1,000 militiamen who “...returned to their homes after the battle concluded,” Greene himself does not take this into account in his letter to Samuel Huntington, President of the Continental Congress.<sup>85</sup> Instead, he gives detail to his tactics of “gradual harassment” of the British forces, even giving orders to full retreat before British forces could fully engage his third line. In learning from the mistakes of Gates at Camden, Greene knew it would be better to regroup with the majority of his army rather than spend them all at once in a futile battle. Regarding his loss at Guilford, Greene is quoted as expressing his patience for battling the British; “We fight, get beat, rise, and fight again.”<sup>86</sup> With the enormous losses in mind, Cornwallis was in no shape to pursue Greene’s larger, though less disciplined, army as he retreated into South Carolina. Instead, Cornwallis is forced to give up on the Southern Campaign as a whole and would retreat into Virginia to regroup with the forces of turncoat Benedict Arnold. Greene would now be free to harass and jeopardize British movements in the South, which led him to corner British forces between Savannah and Charleston as the war drew to a close.<sup>87</sup>

Perhaps the most significant thing to come of this battle was Cornwallis’ refusal to pursue Greene any further. Realizing that further conflict would end much like it did at Cowpens and even Guilford, Tarleton would describe Cornwallis’ need to regroup as “vital”, stating that “...the move...to Guilford, produced one of the most hazardous, as well as severe battles that occurred during the war,...in that fortunate exploit the British army was crippled.”<sup>88</sup> In an effort

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<sup>85</sup> Lieutenant-General Banastre Tarleton, *A history of the campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the southern provinces of North America*, 278.

<sup>86</sup> Nathanael Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, ed. Richard Snowman, Dennis Conrad, Roger Parks, and Elizabeth Stevens, 435.

<sup>87</sup> William Simms, *The life of Nathanael Greene, major-general in the army of the revolution*, 336-337.

<sup>88</sup> Lieutenant-General Banastre Tarleton, *A history of the campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the southern provinces of North America*, 278.

to retain what was left of his army, an army Tarleton describes as being "...encumbered with sick and wounded,...destitute of necessary supplies," Cornwallis would march for the coast of North Carolina and Virginia only a mere two weeks after the battle at Guilford in order to join up with Arnold and resupply his forces.<sup>89</sup> Cornwallis must then adopt a strategy in favor of pacifying Virginia for a future incursion back into the Carolinas, a move Tarleton says would be "invaluable" in the occupation of the south.<sup>90</sup> These actions would eventually press Cornwallis to take Yorktown, where he would later become besieged by French and American forces. His surrender here would usher in the end of the war.

### **Conclusion**

The battles of Kings Mountain, Cowpens, and Guilford Courthouse are prime examples of the tactic, skill, and strategy employed by the men leading the Southern Department of the American Revolution. The use of militia forces, terrain, and regulars enabled a decisive win for the Revolutionaries and further cemented the hold that the Americans would retain on the South for the duration of the war. The Battle of Kings Mountain highlighted the effectiveness of Patriot American militia forces, especially when fighting Tory American militia, by utilizing the essence of surprise, the advantage posed by the heavily forested terrain surrounding Kings Mountain, and early evidence of psychological warfare to overwhelm and dispatch a larger and more powerful enemy force. In fact, the battle was considered "...the greatest victory of the Southern militia..." in the entire war.<sup>91</sup> The Battle of Cowpens highlighted the tactical ability of Daniel Morgan in

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<sup>89</sup> Lieutenant-General Banastre Tarleton, *A history of the campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the southern provinces of North America*, 280-282.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* 282-284, 286.

<sup>91</sup> Wilma Dykeman, *With Fire and Sword: The Battle of Kings Mountain*, 78.

the face of a more experienced and highly disciplined force. By positioning his forces between rugged, wooded hills and the Broad River, Morgan eliminated the ability for Tarleton to rely heavily on flanking maneuvers, but also nullified any possibility for his militia forces to break and rout. His use of militia for skirmishers also reduced the ability for the British infantry to fight effectively as constant riflemen were ordered to focus their fire on British infantry and cavalry officers.<sup>92</sup> Morgan's planned faux retreat of the militia also added to the confusion of the advancing British. Believing victory was in their grasp, the British continually advanced into progressively larger tiers of American Continental regulars. As the regulars wore down Tarleton's advance, Morgan swung his militia forces back around and into the fight once more. This would bring about the full rout of the now-demoralized British forces and force Lieutenant-Colonel Banastre Tarleton to cede the field to General Morgan.<sup>93</sup> Morgan's use of the terrain, combined with the knowledge of his enemy's abilities enabled the American forces to win a decisive victory at Cowpens, further adding to the stress that Greene was causing strategically. Finally, the Battle of Guilford Courthouse was a classic example of innovative tactics employed by leaders in the Southern theatre. Instead of trying to hold their own in an open field with British regulars, leaders such as Nathanael Greene used hit-and-run tactics to exhaust and demoralize his enemy. Guilford is a key example of this due to the high amount of casualties inflicted upon British forces, which eventually led to Cornwallis' abandonment of the Southern Campaign. As Wilma Dykeman claims, "Cornwallis never regained the full momentum of

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<sup>92</sup> William Waller Edwards, "Morgan and His Riflemen," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (1914): 99-102.

<sup>93</sup> Hugh F. Rankin, *Greene and Cornwallis: The Campaign in the Carolinas*, 36-39.

initiative again...” after the clashes with American forces at Kings Mountain, Cowpens, and Guilford.<sup>94</sup>

Another innovative tactic that resounds through each of the three selected battle would be the use of “riflemen” to specifically target the British leadership. As stated in Babbitts’ *A Devil of a Whipping*, “[Morgan] opted to attack the British Leadership” as a means of adding confusion and calamity to the British ranks.<sup>95</sup> In the Battle of Kings Mountain, even the Patriot militia forces had set up their riflemen in positions to strike down the British officers, including Major Ferguson whose body had been found with “6 or 8 gunshot wounds...” in it.<sup>96</sup> Robert Pugh, author of the article “The Revolutionary Militia in the Southern Campaign, 1780-1781”, claims that the victories at Cowpens and Guilford were due in great part to the tactical brilliance of Daniel Morgan. By using his militia forces in “...scouting, skirmishing, and harassing action,” the British elite regulars, such as the famed Scottish Highlanders, would be lured out into fighting while over long distances while being under harassing fire.<sup>97</sup> Being the innovative tactician he was, even Nathanael Greene adopted Morgan’s complimentary use of militia, which “...cost the English heavily in casualties...” and made each battle “...so costly to the British victors,” that they actually became “...a principal cause of patriot victory in the South.”<sup>98</sup> General Greene’s choice of location for the defense of Guilford was also instrumental in causing high numbers of British casualties. By placing his men atop a hill, which was surrounded by other hills and dotted with thick tree lines, Greene was able to provide cover for his militia and

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<sup>94</sup> Wilma Dykeman, *With Fire and Sword: The Battle of Kings Mountain*, 78.

<sup>95</sup> Lawrence Babbitts, *A Devil of a Whipping*, 154.

<sup>96</sup> Lyman Draper, *Kings Mountain and its Heroes: History of the Battle of Kings Mountain, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1780, and the events which led to it*, 290.

<sup>97</sup> Robert Pugh, “The Revolutionary Militia in the Southern Campaign, 1780-1781,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1957): 174.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

regulars as they beleaguered the oncoming British. This positioning also forced Cornwallis' troops to fight uphill against progressively stronger tiers of Continental regulars, all the while under fire from riflemen and militia forces. This tactic exhausted the advancing British infantry and caused heavy casualties for the Cornwallis' troops.<sup>99</sup> Without the use of such innovative tactics, the forces of Nathanael Greene would have fared no better than General Gates had fared at Camden. The loss and destruction of the American Southern Army would have had severe implications on the ability for the revolutionaries to continue the war successfully. The loss of the South would have allowed Cornwallis to retain his foothold in the colonies and establish a base of operations to further pursue action in Virginia and Pennsylvania and almost certainly ended the war in favor of the British. However, the successful uses of the American Southern militia, strategic use of terrain, and the tactical successes of the American regulars singlehandedly changed the outcome of the Southern Campaign of the American Revolution.

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<sup>99</sup> John E. Felting, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press. 2007), 497-499.

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